

Building a Sustainable Community Food System in Seattle and King County: Concept for Developing a Local Food Policy Council

Executive Summary

A Seattle/King County food policy council will provide a role for city and county governments, in partnership with private sector (for- and non-profit) organizations, to play in decreasing food insecurity, improving health, and increasing the sustainability of our food system. Such a public-private partnership will undertake a comprehensive food system assessment in order to identify priority areas for developing policy and program recommendations, educating and engaging the public, leveraging resources for food system improvements, and strengthening linkages among food system components. The goal of the individuals and organizations promoting this effort is to establish a Seattle/King County food policy council by the beginning of 2006.

What if all residents of Seattle and King County had access to nutritious, fresh food that is produced and distributed in a just manner? What if farming, food processing and distribution were flourishing as part of the local economy and contributing to a healthy environment? This is the vision of a committed group of individuals and organizations in Seattle/King County striving to establish a local food policy council.

Washington has the 10th highest rate of hunger in the nation, 3.4 percent of Washington households went hungry between 2001 and 2003, and over 2 million visits were made to food banks in King County in 2003, including almost 568,000 children's visits. Our region is also experiencing epidemic levels of overweight and obese children and adults. Paradoxically, the problems of hunger and obesity often coexist in the same households (see box at right). Food waste accounts for about 20 percent of King County's solid waste stream. Meanwhile, our farmland is under continual threat and farmers struggle with global competition. At the same time, most farm workers do not earn a living wage, endure unsafe worksites and living areas, are exposed to toxic pesticides in the fields, and lack of affordable, decent housing. These systemic problems carry huge economic, social and environmental costs and represent critical failings of our current food system.

How as a community can we address these issues and their underlying causes? How can we work together to help ensure that our communities and our residents are healthy, have access to fresh, nutritious food, and that local farms continue to play a role in meeting our basic food needs?

The Hunger - Obesity Paradox

At the heart of any future policy has to be two issues which at first glance seem contradictory: hunger and obesity. **These problems are in fact two sides of the same coin. For millions of families, when they don't have enough money to buy food, they go hungry. But, when they have only a little money, they tend to buy low-cost foods, which may or may not have all the nutrients they need.** So our challenge isn't only to ensure that people have enough food to eat, but that they have the resources and access to enough of the right foods.

-- Dan Glickman,
Secretary of Agriculture 2000

Systems thinking works by expanding its view to take into account larger and larger numbers of interactions as an issue is being studied. [It is] extremely effective on [problems] involving complex issues, those that depend a great deal on the past or on the actions of others, and those stemming from ineffective coordination among those involved.

-- Daniel Aronson, 1996
The Thinking Page – www.thinking.net

Healthy food is a basic human need along with adequate shelter, a safe environment and clean water. Yet, our local governments have no comprehensive local planning process to ensure access to healthy foods for all residents. No local government jurisdiction has a "Department of Food" and the government programs that address hunger, nutrition, agriculture, and food sector labor conditions are spread across many agencies and jurisdictions. Systemic problems such as hunger, nutrition and agricultural sustainability can be better addressed with a more coordinated approach than by a myriad of separate or isolated efforts. We can do more together than alone.

Food Policy Councils can address a variety of issues not normally examined or implemented from within government. They can bring to the table a broader array of interested voices, examine issues that often go unexamined such as the effectiveness of food assistance programs and the causes of hunger in a society, and develop a more comprehensive approach to analyzing issues.

(www.worldhungeryear.org)

Establishing a food policy council offers a way for us to be more effective by capturing the synergy of working together with a common local food systems planning approach. Food policy councils have played important roles in successfully addressing food system issues in a number of locations throughout North America by encouraging partnerships between public and private groups using food as the vehicle for building relationships and developing local resources. Efforts of existing food policy councils:

- cut costs for public healthcare associated with hunger, malnutrition and obesity
- enhanced economic development through support of food sector jobs
- reduced the social costs of hunger
- expanded use of safer, healthier foods from local sources
- reduced pollution and waste associated with food production and transportation

Call to Action

Establishing a joint Seattle/King County Food Policy Council will help integrate food-related decisions throughout the various levels of city and county government and provide broad-based community input to develop sound food policy for our region. This effort will serve as model for other regions in the state working with similar circumstances and challenges to community food security.

Functions/goals of a Seattle/King County food policy council:

- research and develop policy and program recommendations to inform Seattle and King County decision-makers
- inform, educate and engage the public in their local food system
- leverage resources and serve as a catalyst for food system projects or initiatives
- organize and facilitate linkages across the food system

Why a food policy council here and now?

Currently, Seattle and King County governments do not have any comprehensive food policies or programs. Food- and farming-related issues are addressed in varying degrees by various departments and agencies, with little coordination among the groups and no comprehensive set of identifiable outcomes.

The fact that our area lacks identifiable “food policies” is startling in the face of recent statistics. King County, with almost 1.79 million people, is the state’s most urban county and represents nearly 30% of total population. Nearly one-third of the County’s residents live in Seattle.

Hunger and food insecurity in Washington State have exceeded national averages for the last eight years. In 2000, 22,597 families

The term “**food system**” is used frequently in discussions about nutrition, food, health, community economic development and agriculture. The food system includes all processes involved in keeping us fed: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming and disposing of food. ... A “**community food system**” is promoted as an ideal – a food system in which food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular geographic location.

(J. Wilkins, www.cce.cornell.edu)

Community food security is generally accepted as “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice”

(Hamm, 2001).

In the broadest terms, **community food security** can be described as a prevention-oriented concept that supports the development and enhancement of sustainable, community-based strategies to improve access of low-income households to healthful nutritious food supplies, to increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs, and to promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues.

(USDA ERS, www.ers.usda.gov)

or 142,546 individuals earned incomes below the poverty level. The number of food bank clients in King County increased over 37% between January 2000 and March 2004. Currently, \$25 million in food stamps are issued per month in King County. Unfortunately, the most economical foods – those most accessible to people on a low income- are typically foods that are high in fats, salt, sugars and other refined carbohydrates. This may partly explain why low-income populations including the food insecure have the highest rates of overweight and obesity in the county. Overall, 52 percent of County residents are overweight or obese, leading to diabetes, heart disease and other preventable ailments.

Our region is losing farmland, farm businesses and farming support systems at an alarming rate. According to the American Farmland Trust, the Puget Sound region is the fifth most threatened farmland region in the nation. King County has 61,500 acres of farmland remaining, just 5% of the County's total land area of 2200 square miles. Of the 1,548 farms, 93% are family-owned and average farm size is 27 acres. Between 1997 and 2002, the County lost 269 farms and nearly 10,500 acres of farmland. While the market value of agricultural products sold in 2002 was over \$120 million, 71% of the County's farms had net losses. The average age of farmers is over 55 and we have eight times as many senior farmers (65 and over) as young farmers (under 35). Age, financial and other barriers are creating a lack of new farm operators.

The King County Agriculture Commission was created in 1994 to address these challenges and to provide farmers the opportunity for an active role in land use decisions and in the development and evaluation of policies, regulations and incentives that may significantly affect commercial agriculture. This effort represents a key piece of food system, however, the food system encompasses much more.

Can we develop, coordinate and implement food system policies that link the social, economic, and environmental development impacts of food choices with farming and urban issues? Can we provide the opportunity for the broader community interested in food and farming issues to work together with local government to develop more informed outcomes and workable solutions to these issues? The answer is *yes*.

Research and input from a broad group of community members, organizations and businesses, indicate that a food policy council can help proactively address these issues and build on existing strengths. A food policy council is intended to represent a wide range of expertise on local food system issues such as hunger relief, health, nutrition, farming, food business, industry, farm worker issues, food safety and biosecurity, urban planning, community education and institutional food purchasing and practices. Food policy councils are an innovative means of applying a systems approach to systemic problems.

How did we get here?

The synergy that has brought us to the stage of creating a food policy council has been building over several years. Initially, individuals from the community gardening and agriculture sectors began discussions of an integrated approach to address food system failures. Now, health, nutrition, hunger relief and other interests are involved in research and planning to create a food policy council -- testimony to our capacity to create a thriving food system accessible to all. Highlighted here are key events that have fueled the momentum behind our efforts.

Community Food Security Coalition Conference, 2001

Food system stakeholders met to help plan the Community Food Security Coalition Conference held in Seattle in 2002. The role and importance of food policy councils nationwide became the focus of a panel session for that conference. The idea of a food policy council in Washington and more locally, struck a chord with many participants. Members of the planning committee carried the idea forward to future planning efforts.

Growing a Regional Food Economy, January 2004

A forum to promote farm viability, food access, economic development and environmental stewardship in King County. Attracted over 50 food system stakeholders. Key desired outcomes: food policy council, farm to cafeteria program, improved farmers markets, new infrastructure for farm processing, and creating a regional food identity.

Connecting Local Farms & Schools: Addressing Child Nutrition and Obesity Issues in King County K-12 Schools, May 2004

A forum attracting over 100 food service directors, parents, farmers, community organizers and students to explore opportunities for serving local foods in K-12 schools in King County.

Food Policy Council Planning Meetings, May, June, July and September 2004

A series of meetings were held to carry forward the desired outcome of creating a local food policy council. Input on vision, mission, goals, geographic jurisdiction, and informational needs including components of a food system assessment was generated.

Food Policy Planning Group Steering Committee Formed, October 2004

Food policy council expertise provided by a visit from Mark Winne (formerly with the Hartford Food System) prompted directed actions to move the agenda forward.

What is next?

Our goal is to have a Seattle/King County food policy council in place by 2006. To reach this goal we have identified a number of key objectives and tasks.

Objective 1: Obtain decision-maker and wider stakeholder support.

Tasks: Circulate letter of intent and concept paper for stakeholder signatures.
Meet with key city and county officials

Objective 2: Obtain government sanction from City of Seattle and King County

Tasks: Draft resolution statements
Identify departments within governments to house the council

Objective 3: Develop charter food policy council priority areas

Tasks: Conduct food system assessments (i.e., mapping food system resources and barriers, food policy inventory, etc.)

Objective 4: Develop council structure and guidelines.

Tasks: Identify and define roles of charter members for appointment to the council.
Identify mechanism for city/county collaboration and communication.
Ensure collaborative relationship with County Agriculture Commission.
Establish subcommittees.

Objective 5: Develop food policy council staff coordination position.

Tasks: Develop job description
Identify funding sources
Estimate time needs
Identify entity to house coordinator position.

Good for All of Us

A Seattle/King County food policy council will provide a role for city and county governments in partnership with private sector organizations to play in strengthening our food system. Addressing policies that affect our food system is an effective means for increasing the impact of the many existing public and private efforts to feed all of our residents, ensure healthy lifestyles, creating economic opportunities and steward our natural resources environment. It makes good sense for all of us.